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THE TRANSLATION OF ETHNONYMS AND RACIAL SLURS IN FILMS

American Blackness in Italian Dubbing and Subtitling

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The present investigation sets out to describe how ethnonyms and racial slurs relating to the portrayal of black characters in US films have been translated and retranslated for Italian audiences through dubbing and subtitling. The study first underlines significant socio-linguistic changes in labelling African American ethnicity in US films. It then analyses the way in which this dynamic vocabulary has been communicated to Italian audiences between the 1960s and the 1990s. The search for socio-linguistic correspondence is analysed by looking at the interpretative strategies of first translations (i.e. dubbed versions) and subsequent retranslations (i.e. subtitles of films previously dubbed). A selection of examples highlights the translators' preferences among possible lexical alternatives and then shows how their choices are variously constrained by socio-cultural and linguistic specificity, by normativism and habitual translational behaviour. Different technical requirements and the historical and industrial contingency of dubbing and subtitling in Italy are also considered. Finally, the diverse renderings in Italian dubbed and subtitled versions suggest temporal variation and shifts in social and cultural mores in relation to the use of linguistic ethnic offence.

“A word is not a crystal, transparent and unchanged.

It is the skin of a living thought and may vary greatly in color and content
according to the circumstances and the time in which it is used”

Oliver Wendell Holmes¹

In the critical economic and political climate of recent years, Italian citizens and right-wing politicians are still being heard from inside and outside Italy rumbling xenophobic attacks against Italian citizens or migrants of African origins.² The use of linguistic xenophobia against blacks in Italy, whether heard on the screen or stemming from mediatised political debates, is a controversial minefield fuelled by ideologically driven discourses over issues of

¹ Quoted in Kennedy (2002: 55) from *Towne v. Eisner*, 245 U.S. 418, 425 (1918).

² Only recently, another series of verbal attacks has been directed to abuse in sickening overtones a Minister of the Italian Parliament. Refer for instance to <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-23312479>> [accessed 17/08/13]

security and public welfare which more than ever deserves to be given serious room for discussion and aptly confronted with legal action.

Ethnonyms and racial slurs are culture-bound expressions which have been and are used to carry and perpetuate racist prejudices and practices, or, on the contrary, to raise awareness towards their discriminatory power. Although verbal intolerance towards ethnic diversity is geographically contingent and historically embedded, it is also capable of travelling across temporal, national, linguistic and cultural barriers through means of translation.³ This present contribution would like to observe the journey across time, languages and cultures of ethnonyms and racial slurs deployed in US cinema in reference to American blackness and its translation for Italian screens. I intend to do so by taking into account a significant period of time, approximately forty years between the 1960s and the 1990s, and pass in review a series of US films which feature the use of ethnic epithets and insults in relation to black Americans. I then group together the various lexical solutions which have been implemented by Italian film translators in dubbing and later in subtitles. I concurrently observe the extent to which the Italian translators dealt with ethnicity on the screen, crossing temporal and cultural barriers and getting to grips with the various pragmatic linguistic functions fulfilled by ethnic vocabulary in film dialogues. I therefore consider how the translators' job has been influenced by routine practices within the Italian film translation industry (Paolinelli and Di Fortunato, 2005; Pavesi, 2005). Various interpretative strategies also stimulate a theoretical discussion over film translators' field of practice (Bourdieu, 1993), habitus (Simeoni, 1998: 1-39), level of risk-taking (Pym, 2008: 311-328), normative (Toury, 1995: 53-69) or ethical (Venuti, 2008: 18-19; 2010: 72-81) translational behaviour, giving us the opportunity to reflect upon the social role of translators and on changing linguistic, cultural and ideological attitudes in relation to the labelling of American blackness in Italy.

But first of all, I should clarify the linguistic terms and the film speech which are the objects of this study. The linguistic label *ethnonym* will be used here to indicate the name of a given ethnic group. Ethnonyms can be divided into *exonyms*, when the ethnic label is given by people outside/external to the ethnic group that is being named, and *endonyms* (or *autonyms*),

³ Among the few well-documented studies available in Italian that approach the representation of ethnic otherness in Italian language, cinema, music and the press, worth of particular mention are Federico Faloppa's 2004 *Parole contro. La rappresentazione del diverso nell'italiano e nei dialetti*, and the 2007 book edited by Paola Nobili *Insulti e pregiudizi: discriminazione etnica e turpiloquio in film, canzoni e giornali*. Of great relevance for the present discussion is the 2011 MA thesis by Denise Filmer *Translating Racial Slurs*, which explores the theoretical and practical implications of transferring offensive language between English and Italian in the film *Gran Torino*.

when it is the ethnic group itself to create and use the term in self-designation. If exonyms are used in a derogatory fashion, then they become *ethnophaulisms*. The term *ethnophaulism* was originally coined by the psychologist Abraham Aaron Roback in 1944 to describe a demeaning/hostile/provocative linguistic label for an ethnic or race group. As the expressions *ethnic insults* or *racial slurs* have been employed more widely to indicate linguistic xenophobia, in this context I shall make use of the terms ethnophaulism, ethnic/racial insult/slur interchangeably. Moreover, I shall refer to umbrella expressions such as taboo language, which also include ethnophaulism within their semantic field.

As a consequence of complex historical, social and cultural circumstances, ethnonyms and racial slurs in relation to African American ethnicity have been and are subject to a complex process of linguistic change. Many of these linguistic labels have gone through intricate and debatable processes of social acceptance, contempt, condemnation and tabooisation: a paradigmatic oft-quoted case is the word *nigger*, recently found in the media in its euphemised form, the *N- word*.⁴ This controversial socio-linguistic change is also evident by looking at how film dialogues have characterised blacks in American cinema.

The corpus of film speech I decided to take under analysis comes from various films produced in the US between the early 1960s and the late 1990s. I have selected the Hollywood ‘racial’ dramas *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962)⁵ and *In the Heat of the Night* (1967)⁶ because these films, at the height of the social protest for civil rights of the 1960s, explicitly dealt with racism and segregation, and often conveyed these issues by means of ethnophaulism. Mainstream ‘Blaxploitation’ films of the 1970s such as *Shaft* (1971)⁷ and *Foxy Brown* (1974)⁸ interested me because they feature streetwise black leading characters ‘talking cool and telling it how it is’. The ‘Hood’ films *New Jack City* (1990)⁹ and *Boiz N the Hood* (1991)¹⁰ were chosen for the strong verbal expressionism and for intertextual references to contemporary rap music (Massood, 2003; Donalson, 2007). Film speech from

⁴ For a description of the term *nigger* and its evolution from a descriptive term linked with slavery to its increased deploy as a highly offensive racial insult, to its comparatively recent, contextual and exclusive usage as an endonym to express affection and solidarity refer specifically to Kennedy (2002) and Hughes (2006: 326-330). For a historical discussion of the use and definition of the word *Negro* (with capital letter) refer to Richard B. Moore’s 1960s study *The Name “Negro”: Its Origin and Evil Use*, re-edited by W. Burghardt Turner and Joyce Moore Turner in 1992.

⁵ Directed by Robert Mulligan and distributed by Universal Pictures.

⁶ Directed by Norman Jewison and distributed by United Artists.

⁷ Directed by Gordon Parks and distributed by MGM.

⁸ Written and directed by Jack Hill and distributed by AIP.

⁹ Directed by Mario Van Peebles and distributed by Warner Bros.

¹⁰ Directed by John Singleton and distributed by Columbia Pictures.

Quentin Tarantino's films *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Jacky Brown* (1997)¹¹ has also been included in the corpus for the controversy around Tarantino's deploy of ethnonyms in relation to black ethnicity.¹²

1. Ethnonyms and racial slurs in 1960s and 1970s film dialogues

In the racial and blaxploitation feature films produced during the 1960s and 1970s ethnic slurs are mostly uttered by white characters against black characters. Racial slurs were arguably used in these films in an informed way, in order to underline the abuse and the condition of perpetuated violent (verbal) discrimination against black individuals in real America. Let us have a look at few meaningful cases.

The first examples are taken from the Universal Pictures' film *To Kill a Mockingbird* (KM). The film was based on Lee Harper's novel of the same name published in 1960 and whose narrative takes place in the early 1930s Alabama. The novel features explicit ethnophaulism in association with racism, prejudice and ignorance. In the first part of the film, we are introduced to the racist southerner Bob Ewell (interpreted by James Anderson), who confronts the small-town lawyer Atticus Finch (Gregory Peck) during their first encounter at the courtroom: 'Cap'n, I'm real sorry they picked you to defend that *nigger* that raped my Mayella'. However, the upright lawyer Atticus, indignant, ignores Ewell's racial slurs against the innocent Tom Robinson (Broke Peters). Later we hear Ewell reiterating the twofold injurious slur: 'You *nigger lover*!' outside the Robinsons' house.¹³ Subsequently, during the famous courtroom sequence, Atticus/Peck invariantly uses both the ethnonyms *black* and *Negro* to defend Tom in front of an all-white jury:

Tom Robinson, a human being, ... was to her a daily reminder of what she did. Now, what did she do? She tempted a *Negro*. She was white, and she tempted a *Negro*. She

¹¹ Both directed by Quentin Tarantino and distributed by Miramax films.

¹² Well documented studies on the fictional portrayal of black Americans in US films (e.g. Bogle, 1989; Silk, 1990; Diawara, 1993) have already discussed how certain processes of representation and reception permit different readings of black Americans in cinema and have ethical-political, 'black aesthetics' repercussions. The present study acknowledges how important issues of authorship (e.g., which films have been written/directed/produced by black creative individuals and infused by a black perspective?) and the ideological imperatives shaped by different cultural and industrial contexts (e.g., which films are produced by Hollywood or by independent filmmakers?) have influenced the language of films, but for reasons of focus it cannot draw into a semiotic discourse and question hegemonic practices of representation in the American film industry.

¹³ As documented in Kennedy (2002: 25-27), the disparaging epithet is attested during the Civil War Era in reference to nonblacks who sided with African Americans in racial controversies, also referred to as 'black republicans'. The slur was often to be heard in the 1960s during the civil rights movements, to deride whites who sided with blacks in the civil right protest.

did something that, in our society, is unspeakable. She kissed *a black man*. Not an old uncle, but a strong, young *Negro man*.

In this film the ethnonyms *black* and *colored* are used by both black and white characters in the same connotation given to the term *Negro*.

The dialogues of the film *In the Heat of the Night* (HN) make also use of ethnophaulism. Similarly to *KM*, the film was based upon a novel of the same name, published by John Ball in 1965, and set in the South. Ethnic insults in the film are directed most exclusively against the protagonist, the police homicide detective from Philadelphia, Virgil Tibbs (interpreted by Sidney Poitier). Passing by a small provincial town in Mississippi, detective Tibbs gets involved in a local crime investigation. Despite continue racial abuse from part of the local police and some townspeople, he solves the case. Let us look at a few examples. Sam Wood (Warren Oates), one of the local cops, patronises Tibbs with the demeaning appellative *boy*:

On your feet, *boy*... You move before I tell you to, *boy*, by God, and I'm gonna clean your plough. That's pretty fat there, ain't it, *boy*? (referring to the money in his wallet).

Police chief Gillespie (Rod Steiger), jumping to conclusions, accuses Tibbs of having robbed and killed a prominent businessman. After Tibbs defends himself indicating he earned that money working, Gillespie replies: '*Colored* can't earn that kind of money, *boy*'.

In addition to *colored* and *boy*, there are many examples of ethnophaulism in the film: *nigger-boy*, *black boy*, *nigger-lover*, *Negro officer*, or other racist expressions such as: 'What you doin' here wearing *white man's clothes*?'.

Blaxploitation films' dialogues of the 1970s are frequently interspersed with racist abuse, uttered both against – and now also from – black characters. Starring Richard Roundtree as private detective John Shaft, *Shaft* is one of the most influential blaxploitation films of the 1970s and one of first box-office hits of the genre. Also based upon a contemporary novel,¹⁴ dialogues in *Shaft* feature moderate swearing (e.g. four-letter words such as *hell*, *damn*, *shit*) and frequent ethnophaulism. Although the presence of foul and offensive speech is still

¹⁴ *Shaft* (1970), written by Ernest Tidyman, who also works as the film's screenwriter together with John D. F. Black.

tempered and stereotyped, its use has increased notably in comparison to film speech of the decade before.¹⁵

Many are the examples in *Shaft* where the protagonist addresses issues of racism directly and uses self-designed ethnonyms to underline his own ethnic identity. For example, in the first part of the film, in reply to the ethnic slang and toponym uttered by Italian American police lieutenant Vic Androzzi (Charles Cioffi) ‘How come a couple of *cats from Harlem* came downtown this morning looking for John Shaft?’, Shaft rebuts shrewdly: ‘Well, they’re *soul brothers*. They came down so I could teach them the handshake’. Later at the police station, in a subsequent exchange with Androzzi, Shaft exclaims:

My ‘*Negro*’ friends don’t walk around *with rabbits’ feet* no more. ... It warms my *black heart* to see you so concerned about *us minority folks*.

To which Androzzi replies, dwindling Shaft’s verbal provocations: ‘Oh, come on, Shaft. What is it with this *black shit*?’

Pam Grier’s female archetype of Blaxploitation *Foxy Brown* (FB) echoes Shaft’s verbal unscrupulousness when she is confronted with racial – and sexist – harassment from the other characters in the film. However, many examples in the film indicate that the most violent abuse is directed against her: e.g. *goddamn nigger*, *black bitch*, *spook*. Let us take this coarse verbal exchange as an example.

White rapist at the ranch: ‘I’m just getting my kicks out of letting *Miss Big-jug-jiggerboo* think she can go for a walk.¹⁶ ... You’re a lucky *nigger*, you know that?’

At such racial dysphemism, Foxy follows suit: ‘Thank you, *ugly*, *prickless*, *white faggot*, *peasant motherfucker*!’

1.1. The expressive use of ethnonyms: the case of Hood films

Taboo language, including slang, swearing, cursing and profane language in general, but also ethnonyms and ethnophaulism, is often employed in more recent films as an expressive

¹⁵ This could be linked to a radical opening of the cultural climate following the civil protests as well as to the loosening of the severe film censorship system in the US in the late 1960s. In 1966, in fact, the Motion Pictures Association of America (MPAA), under the lead of Jack Valenti, disbanded self-regulation and the Production Code Administration (PCA), and soon later, in 1968, established the ratings system (Classification and Rating Administration, CARA) still in use today. On the subject refer in particular to Bernstein (2000).

¹⁶ The epithet is found in Roback (1944: 50, 72) under various spellings such as *Jigaboo* and *Zigaboo*. According to Allen (1983: 49), the term is attested since 1910 and has uncertain origin.

feature, i.e. such vocabulary could often be removed without affecting the speech information content. On the other hand, its removal would markedly tone down the forcefulness of the dialogue. There are frequent examples of ethnonyms used for expressiveness, rather than as an explicit racial insult, in the films of the 1970s (see for instance Shaft's use of expressions such as *soul brothers*, *black heart* etc.). It is in the 1990s, however, that the formulaic function and repetitiveness of endonyms such as *nigga* and *brother* are systematically used to intensify the expressiveness of the discourse. Both terms are found in alternative non-standard spellings, which also indicate an unconventional way of communicating ethnic belonging.

More importantly, it is now the black characters (and writers, directors) who often use this 'lingo' to refer to an ethnic kinship and solidarity, or sometimes, on the contrary, to underline and criticise through film symptomatic instances of anti-black, self-hating prejudice. Below I have reported some examples from *New Jack City* (NJC) and *Boiz N the Hood* (BNH):

Nino Brown (Weslie Snipes): 'Look at you *funky black ass*'. (NJC)

Doughboy (Ice Cube): 'Your *black ass* supposed to be learning something'. (BNH)

Ricky (Morris L. Chestnut): 'I'm still trying to find out, *nigga!*' (BNH)

In Hood dialogues, endonyms such as *nigga* and ethnic slangs such as *black ass* are often used as stock phrases for rhyme and alliteration, losing their lexical meaning to function as conversational fillers. Also evident is these terms' syntactic and semantic flexibility and their frequent appearance in combination with foul language (e.g. *black-ass nigga*, *jive-ass friend*, *monkey ass*, *black motherfucker*). The dialogues are unconventionally foul-mouthed to reinforce, in a complex system of cinematic elements (especially the intertextual reference to contemporary rap and hip hop music), the dramatic impact or humorous stance of the story and to rope off cultural turf.¹⁷ However, this profuse presence of ethnic epithets impinges the

¹⁷ To understand the mutual influence between gangsta rap and hip hop lyrics and Hood film dialogues compare the use of ethnonyms in Ice Cube's *The Nigga Ya Love to Hate* (1990); Ice-T's *Straight up Nigga* (1991); Dr. Dre's *The Day the Niggaz Took Over* (1992); 2pac's album *Strictly 4 My N.i.g.g.a.z.* (1993); Notorious B.I.G. *Juicy* (1994); Coolio *Gangsta's Paradise* (1995); Jay-Z's *Real Niggaz Do Real Things* (1997); DMX's *My Niggas* (1998); and so on.

films' age rating or classification, with viewing restrictions often explicitly justified in terms of language use.¹⁸

If in the films *Pulp Fiction* (*PF*) and *Jackie Brown* (*JB*) ethnic slang is often deployed for expressiveness or laughter and in flexible combination with swearing,

Jules (Samuel L. Jackson): 'Shit, *head negro*! That's all you had to say!' (*PF*)

Ordell (Samuel L. Jackson): 'Damn, I bet you come here on a Saturday night, you need *nigga repellent* to keep them *motherfuckers* off your ass.' (*JB*)

on the other hand, a discussion over Tarantino's non-prudent and playful use of ethnonyms to characterise black ethnicity appears to be problematic. This point has been debated because the expressive endonyms, even if pronounced by a black character, are in fact written by Tarantino himself.¹⁹ Clearly, here the controversy lies in the perception of a word's role – i.e. on who uses it, in which context, in which aim and intonation – more than in the use of the word itself. Importantly, the controversy lies also in s/he who hears the race related word. For example, on December 2012 during an interview with *Vibe*, film director Spike Lee was asked to comment on Tarantino's comic western *Django Unchained*.²⁰ The film stars Jamie Foxx in the role of a freed slave turned hero who takes blood full revenge of a racist exploitative plantation owner (Leonardo Di Caprio) to save his wife (Kerry Washington). Lee stated that he would not watch the film for he personally perceived it as a disrespectful treatment of slavery: 'American Slavery Was Not A Sergio Leone Spaghetti Western. It Was A Holocaust. My Ancestors Are Slaves. Stolen From Africa. I Will Honor Them' he later twittered.²¹ In *Django Unchained*, a reviewer has calculated the N-word is repeated more than 109 times.²² Lee's recent interview recalls the diatribe which surfaced in 1997 when the

¹⁸ *NJC* (US MPAA rated R "for strong violence, drug content, sensuality and *language*"; Italian film revision: age 14+); *BNH* (US MPAA rated R "for *language*, violence and sexuality"; Italian film revision: PG); *PF* (US MPAA rated R "for strong graphic violence and drug use, *pervasive strong language* and some sexuality"; Italian film revision: age 14+); *JB* (US MPAA rated R "for strong language, some violence, drug use and sexuality"; Italian film revision: 'T' – no restrictions).

¹⁹ In *PF* is also Tarantino in the role of Jimmie to elicit the N-word.

²⁰ Distributed by the Weinstein Company and Columbia Pictures Int.

²¹ In *Spike Lee slams Django Unchained: 'I'm not Gonna See It'*, *Vibe*, posted on December 21, 2012 <<http://www.vibe.com/article/spike-lee-slams-django-unchained-im-not-gonna-see-it>> [accessed 05/04/2013]

Lee's post on *Twitter* was posted on December 22, 2012 10:18 pm. Capital letters as in the original.

²² <<http://variety.com/2012/film/reviews/django-unchained-1117948899/>> [accessed 05/04/2013]

director of *Do the Right Thing* (1989) criticised Tarantino's use of the term *nigger* in *Jackie Brown*.²³

It is unquestionable that because of the deep uneasiness that fictional portrayals of racism and the hearing of certain kind of expressions in relation to ethnicity can provoke, these expressions, even if employed with an emphatic/expressive connotation and tragicomic sensibility, can still be perceived as racially offensive and retain a forbidden/taboo aura.²⁴ This rather unorthodox vocabulary conveys indeed a set of domestic historical and socio-cultural circumstances, becoming, as Butler has rightly observed,

'the site for a traumatic re-enactment of injury, but one in which the terms not only mean or communicate in a conventional way, but are themselves set forth as discursive items, in their very linguistic conventionality and, hence, as both forceful and arbitrary, recalcitrant and open to reuse.' (1997: 100)

2. Ethnonyms and racial slurs in Italian film translation

Thus what happens when the highly inflammable sphere that all these elements manage to create – their sense, emotions, historical specificity etc. – does not have for the foreign spectator (in this case the Italian audience) the same meaning it has for the American audience? From what has been discussed so far, it should not come as a surprise that the translation of both offensive and expressive ethnic language which fulfil different pragmatic functions within film language (e.g. to cause offence, to underline ethnic identity, as in-group markers), not only involves transposing semantic correspondence between words, but it also entails the complex issue of rephrasing cultural values linked historically, ideologically and functionally with these utterances. The impact of paralinguistic and aesthetic values is also quite significant, as ethnonyms and racial slurs play a role in the narrative construction of film characters, and are informatively and creatively used by scriptwriters to enhance the expressiveness of their dialogues. Do dubbing translators and subtitlers approach ethnic epithets depending on the functions they fulfil? Do translators privilege the pragmatic function of ethnic epithets over racial content? What is the impact of translational routines in the translation of ethnic epithets? What is the role of individual dubbing translators' choices?

²³ See a recent discussion in <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/quentin-tarantino-accused-of-blaxploitation-by-spike-lee-again-8431183.html>>, article released online on 26 December 2012 [accessed on 05/04/2013].

²⁴ For an insightful discussion of questions of linguistic vulnerability and legitimation see Butler 1997. In specific relation to the contradictory emotions expressed by the word *nigger* see Kennedy (2002: 36-55).

Are subtitlers differentiating their strategies from those taken by dubbers when translating insults and ethnonyms referring to American blackness?

Perhaps needless to say, but important to keep in mind in the frame of our discussion, dubbing is the mainstream audiovisual translation (AVT) mode in Italy. This translation practice was introduced in Italy in the early 1930s and since then Italian theatrical distribution of foreign cinema has been mostly exclusively dubbed.²⁵ Subtitles, on the other hand, have been in use in Italy much later, mainly from the 1990s onwards following the advent of the DVD-Video format. All of the examples from films discussed here have received commercial distribution in Italian cinemas and television in their dubbed version. The Italian release generally follows the films' own domestic run by a few months. This implies that translations for dubbing are more or less contemporary with the original dialogues.²⁶ Italian subtitles, if they have been prepared, were added afterwards for the films' release in the digital format in the 1990s and only destined for private, home video consumption.

2.1. Ethnonyms and racial slurs in Italian dubbing

If taboo expressions are culture-bound concepts, all the more so are ethnonyms and racial slurs, because their usage is closely connected with specific contextual circumstances. It is thus not only problematic, but also debatable, to approach this lexis by means of a word-for-word translation.²⁷ This is especially true in the cases where the terms found in the source texts might not be lexicalised in the target language (e.g. *jiggerboo*); where a term presents different pragmatic and syntactical flexibility (e.g. *nigger*); or where the two languages make different distinctions in the meaning of the same word— for example, the Italian word *negro* translates invariantly *negro* or *nigger*, and historically indicates the colour *nero* [black] (lit. *nigro*, derived from the Latin word *nīger* (-gra -grum)).

²⁵ If we exclude examples of subtitled films specifically targeted to the 'art' circuit, e.g. the Venice film festival.

²⁶ *Il buio oltre la siepe* (KM), 1963, translator unknown; *La calda notte dell'ispettore Tibbs* (HN), 1968; *Shaft il detective* (Shaft), 1971, dubbing adapter: Alberto Piferi; *Foxy Brown* (FB), release date and translator for dubbing unknown; *NJC*, 1991, dubbing adapter: Ruggero Buseti; *Boyz N the Hood strade violente* (BHN), 1992, dubbing adapter: Luigi Calabrò; *Pulp Fiction*'s screening certification dates 1997 (but the film was previously screened perhaps with subtitles at Taormina International Film Festival in August 1994, few months after winning the Palme d'Or at Cannes), dubbing adapter Francesco Vairano; *Jackie Brown* (JB), 1998, dubbing adapter: Mario Paolinelli.

²⁷ The complex process of translating ethnic-related vocabulary is also evident in the non-idiomatic examples of back-translation provided in the following pages which are word-for-word renditions given to support the non-Italian-speaking readers. In some of these examples, the symbol of the tilde (~) is used to underline an approximation of culture-specific expressions which are not lexicalised in the target language or which have more than one socio-linguistic referent.

Translators for dubbing have often tackled ethnic related vocabulary with strategies of 1) intervention, including (a.) generalisation, (b.) paraphrase, (c.) substitution, and (d.) overplay/exaggeration of the ethnonym; 2) ‘minimum’ change strategy: (a.) ‘official’ translation, (b.) retention of the original word or literal calque; 3) omission, where either (a.) ethnic language and slang are both neutralised, or (b.) only ethnic language is neutralised, but this omission is accompanied by the reinforcement of slang or offensive vocabulary. Let us see in greater detail how these strategies come about.

1) Intervention

- (a.) Adoption of a more general or neutral word. This generalisation eventually tones down the offensiveness of the racial epithet:

<i>American dialogues</i>	<i>Italian dubbed dialogues</i>
<i>Whitey</i> (HN 1967)	<i>Bianco</i> [white]
I want you ‘cause you got your other foot in <i>whitey</i> ’s trough! (<i>Shaft</i> 1971)	Voglio te perché tieni un piede dalla nostra parte e uno dalla parte dei <i>bianchi</i> [I want you because you have one foot on our side and one on the whites’ side]

- (b.) Paraphrase (specification; reformulation), using a race-related word:

<i>American dialogues</i>	<i>Italian dubbed dialogues</i>
<i>Harlem cats?</i> (<i>Shaft</i> 1971)	<i>Neri o bianchi?</i> [black or white?]
<i>The spade detective</i> (<i>Shaft</i> 1971)	<i>Uno sbirro negro</i> [~a negro copper]
<i>Goddamn nigger</i> (<i>FB</i> 1974)	<i>Negro da strapazzo</i> [~lousy negro]
Is this some kind of <i>black thing</i> ? (<i>NJC</i> 1990)	È una faccenda privata <i>fra neri</i> ? [It is a private matter among blacks?]
Who’s that <i>big man dingo-looking nigger</i> that you got up there in the picture with you? (<i>JB</i> 1997)	<i>Chi è quel negrone che ha tutta l’aria di essere il cuginetto di Mandingo?</i> [Who is that big negro who looks like Mandingo’s little cousin?]

- (c.) Substitution (cultural, situational); it appears especially if the target language lacks the same specific expression:

<i>American dialogues</i>	<i>Italian dubbed dialogues</i>
<i>You nigger lover</i> (<i>KM</i> 1962)	<i>Amico dei negri</i> [friend of negroes]
We’ve even got time for you to have your <i>soul food</i> (<i>Shaft</i> 1971)	Abbiamo tempo. Puoi mangiarti anche <i>un cornetto</i> [We have time. You can even eat a croissant]
I’m just getting my kicks out of letting <i>Miss</i>	Stavo sgranchendo le gambe e ho sorpreso

<i>Big-jug-jiggerboo</i> think she can go for a walk. You're a lucky <i>nigger</i> , do you know that? (FB 1974)	<i>miss culo nero</i> intenta a fare una passeggiata. Sei fortunata <i>muso nero</i> , lo sai? [I was stretching my legs and I caught miss black ass aiming to go for a walk. ~You're lucky black snout, you know that?]
<i>To the moolenyan in charge</i> (NJC 1990)	<i>All'imperatore dei negretti</i> [To the emperor of little negroes]
What are y'all? <i>Amos and Andy</i> ? Are you <i>Steppin' and he's Fetchit</i> ? (BNH 1991)	Ma da dove venite, <i>dall'Africa</i> ? Chi siete, <i>lo zio Tom e Bozambo</i> ? [But where do you come from, Africa? Who are you, uncle Tom and Bozambo?]
When the Hong Kong flicks came out, every <i>nigger</i> in the world had to have a 45 (JB 1997)	Quando sono usciti quei film di Hong Kong non c'era <i>fratello</i> in giro che non volesse la 45 [When those Hong Kong films came out there was no brother around who didn't want a 45]

In the last example, the dub adapter (Mario Paolinelli) has privileged the expressive meaning of the slur and interpreted it as *fratello* [brother]; a different approach is instead taken a little later, where the pejorative non-standard endonym *them niggers* has been interpreted with the Italian 'official' equivalent > *negro* (*But you know how them niggers is out there, you can't tell 'em* > *però lo sai come sono fatti i negri, non riesci a farli ragionare* [but you know how negroes are, you can't get them thinking] (JB 1997)). Significantly, Paolinelli (in Paolinelli-Di Fortunato, 2005) has acknowledged – although, we shall discuss, somehow indirectly – these translational choices when discussing his adaptation of the film *Jackie Brown*. According to the translator, to avoid incurring into stereotypes and falling often into what he calls 'topos letterario del doppiaggese', i.e. dubbing translational routines or formulaic expressions typical of Italian *dubbese* clearly discussed by Maria Pavesi in her seminal *La traduzione filmica* (2005: 48-52), it is necessary to refrain from a word-for-word approach and to intervene creatively or 'inventively' on a case by case basis to confront with – and then reproduce – a colourful, expressive and innovative language.²⁸ Unfortunately, in this analysis, Paolinelli does not specifically account for his renderings of ethnonyms and racist language, being rather more interested in underlining the translational challenges posed by the variously composite elements of the 'street jargon' or slang spoken in the film (Paolinelli-

²⁸ The Italian passage I am discussing reads: 'Il continuo intercalare di "fucking" e delle sue varianti, l'appellativo "man", l'uso di "nigga" per indicare in senso ironicamente dispregiativo i "fratelli neri" creano ogni volta al dialoghista il problema di mantenerne l'efficacia in italiano senza cadere nello stereotipo. Riteniamo che il problema vada affrontato volta per volta, e che – poiché una traduzione non va fatta parola per parola –, si possa riproporre un linguaggio colorito andando ad intervenire su quella che è la sua sostanza: l'invenzione e non la ripetizione.' (Paolinelli-Di Fortunato, 2005: 61-62)

Di Fortunato, 2005: 62). However, I shall argue here that a separate discourse should be made for the translation of racial slurs, because these words have an ideological force which slang does not necessarily have, and which is amplified by their constant reiteration and pragmatic flexibility.

On a more theoretical level, Paolinelli's self-validation of personal translational choices ultimately reveals a certain level of individual risk-taking in supporting innovating and creative linguistic solutions and in trying to avoid the tested safety nets of translational routines. Here he appears to challenge the habitual standardised *modus operandi* within the Italian film dubbing studios.²⁹ On the other hand, if we decide to take in a more sociological approach and observe Italian AVT practices from a Bourdieusian point of view (1993), it should be noted that this burden of 'communicative risk' (Pym, 2008: 322-327) taken by Paolinelli is considerably reduced by his status as one of the few film translators for dubbing and especially by the fact that dubbing is the dominant film translation industry in Italy. According to this logic, Paolinelli's translational behaviour is endorsed by the fact that he operates in a highly demanded profession, within an extremely profitable and institutionally regulated field. Paolinelli's socially recognised and rewarding activity allows the dub adapter a greater degree of individual translation agency, which on the other hand contributes to his 'subservient habitus' (Simeoni, 1998) to the persisting dominant AVT norms and practices in Italy.

(d.) Overplay of the offensive charge of the ethnonym:

<i>American dialogues</i>	<i>Italian dubbed dialogues</i>
<i>Caucasian</i> (<i>Shaft</i> 1971)	<i>Viso pallido</i> [paleface]
Little <i>punk black-ass</i> dealer (<i>FB</i> 1974)	Piccolo <i>spacciatore dal muso nero</i> [little black-snout dealer]
Give <i>that little nigga</i> the ball back (<i>BNH</i> 1991)	<i>È un povero negretto. Ridagli in pallone</i> [He is a poor little negro. Give him the ball back]
<i>What the fuck you looking at, nigga?</i> //I'm still trying to find out, <i>nigga!</i> (<i>BNH</i> 1991)	<i>Che hai da guardare, negraccio?</i> //È quello che voglio sapere da te, <i>negraccio!</i> [What are you looking at, nigger?//That's what I like to know from you, nigger!]

²⁹ Revealing in this regard are his hints at debatable commercial practices in film adaptation and distribution (52, 56) and the chapter dedicated to the dubbing legislation in Italy which discusses the contractual condition of the handful of film translators for dubbing operating in the country (79-110).

In the last example of *BHN*, another prominent Italian translator and dub adapter (Luigi Calabrò) has interpreted the endonym *nigga* as racially abusive, perhaps because the two characters are on the brink of having a fight. The actors stress their pronunciation of *nigga*, which is evidently spelled out in a medium to close up shot. The adapter has chosen then the highly disparaging word *negraccio* (*negro* + *-accio*). I shall come back to reflect on the use of this racist term in the following page. As far as the technical constraints are merely concerned, the use of this particular word in both occurrences was possibly influenced by the quantitative and qualitative similarities of the two words (and in particular in the pronouncing the *-a* at the same point in the utterance). Instead, later in the same scene Calabrò has preferred to omit the endonym, so that the utterance ‘You got a problem here? You got a problem, *nigga*?’ is translated as ‘*C’è qualche problema? C’è qualche problema?*’ (see more similar examples and relative discussion in 3(a.)).

2) Minimum change strategy

(a.) ‘Official’ equivalent:

<i>American dialogues</i>	<i>Italian dubbed dialogues</i>
<i>Colored</i> (n.)/ <i>colored people</i> (adj.) (HN 1967)	<i>Gente di colore</i> ; (but also frequently as <i>negro</i> in HN)
<i>Negro</i> (HN 1967)	<i>Negro/a</i>
<i>Black</i> (in films of the 1960s and 1970s)	<i>Negro/a</i> ; (also as <i>muso nero</i> in HN)
<i>Nigger</i> (HN, FB, BNH, PF, JB)	<i>Negro/a</i>

As discussed above, the Italian slur *negro* is found also in its pejorative suffixation *-accio* and the diminutive form *-etto* > *negraccio*, *negretto* (BNH and PF) and in the augmentative suffixation *-one* > *negrone* (JB). Excluding the disparaging *negrone* (which is literally employed to translate the expression *big nigger*), and *negretto* (which variously translates *little nigga*, and *dead nigger* in reference to a character of young age), the form *negraccio* is rarely used in everyday spoken Italian as a racial slur (the term originally was used to indicate a darkish colour).³⁰ However, quite significantly in the light of the present discussion, the

³⁰ See for example the use of the word as ‘*di pelo n.*’ in the biography *Il cardinale di Mazarino*. c.1653-1661, ed. Chiala, Luigi (1885), *Rivista Contemporanea Nazionale Italiana* 3.4: 539-584. According to Chiala, the writer is anonymous, although possibly of Roman origins (1885: 540).

word *negraccio* recurs frequently in Italian translations of foreign literature.³¹ Whether by coincidence or not, and only as far as the very few examples I was able to give indicate, the occurrence of this term in literary writing appears to be subsequent to the dubbing of this film – the dubbed version must have been finalised before 15 January 1992, date in which the film was granted the *nulla osta*, the theatrical screening authorisation by the Italian state run film commissions. This investigation does not intend nor has the space to discuss if Calabrò's overplayed translation of the offensive endonym as a disparaging ethnic insult has had a role in triggering and influencing the use of the racist term in other cultural productions translated into or originally written in Italian. However, as Denise Filmer has rightly concluded in relation to the pervasive use of the racist expression '*muso giallo*' in the Italian dubbing (directed by Filippo Ottoni) of Clint Eastwood's *Gran Torino* (2008):

'We should be alert to these phenomena in the translation process and scrutinise possible outcomes. ... It is of crucial importance in our global society to achieve a better understanding of the underpinning ideologies, the processes involved and the effects produced in rendering Otherness across linguistic and cultural barriers, thereby raising awareness to the increasingly pervasive role translation plays in shaping word and thought.' (2011: 159-160)

As much as Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* dramatically acknowledges and criticises instances of self-hating prejudice and violence within the black community of the South Central District of Los Angeles, Italian dubbers should be aware of their influential role as cultural mediators in translating ethnicity. As it has been debated by Lawrence Venuti on several occasions, practitioners and scholars of translation should adopt a hermeneutic model of translation which would allow them to abandon their empiricism, in order 'to gain a more sophisticated understanding of their interpretative labor' as well as 'to assess the ethical implications of that labor' (Venuti, 2010: 72). As far as our present case is concerned, Italian translators should be paying attention to the social consequences of propagating the use of racist expressions on Italian screens, expressions which in the source texts have instead fulfilled pragmatic uses with profound historical and socio-cultural differences.

³¹ For example, in the novel *Il campo di nessuno* (*Le Champ de Personne*, by Daniel Picouly, 1995), translated from the French by Yasmina Melaouah in 1996; or in the translation of Gabriel García Márquez's biography *Vivere per raccontarla* (*Vivir para contarla*), 2002. *Negraccio* as a highly offensive racial epithet is also used by Stefano Benni in the novel *La Compagnia dei Celestini* (1st published October 1992), a narrative which features many cases of calques and word creations based on the English language (e.g., the very name of the story set *Gladonia*).

(b.) Retention (although the only case documented in the corpus refers to an insult for an Italian American character):

<i>American dialogues</i>	<i>Italian dubbed dialogues</i>
<i>Wop</i> (<i>Shaft</i> 1971)	<i>Wop</i>

3) Omission

(a.) Ethnic (and slang/offensive language) neutralisation:

<i>American dialogues</i>	<i>Italian dubbed dialogues</i>
One of your <i>jive-ass friends</i> (<i>FB</i> 1974)	Uno qualsiasi dei tuoi amici [Anyone of your friends]
Look at you <i>funky black ass</i> (<i>NJC</i> 1990)	Sei come una capra [~You are as dumb as a goat]
Nino! <i>My ace boon coon!</i> How you doing? (<i>NJC</i> 1990)	Amico mio carissimo! Come stai? [My dearest friend! How are you? (Ironically)]
I hope you kill his <i>black, hardened ass</i> (<i>NJC</i> 1990)	Spero che lo facciate a pezzi quella carogna! [~I hope you tear that carrion to pieces]
<i>Sorry-ass niggas</i> (<i>BNH</i> 1991)	Fanno letteralmente schifo [they are literally disgusting]
<i>Damn, nigga</i> , what's wrong with you? (<i>BNH</i> 1991)	Ma si può sapere che ti prende a te? [~ But how can one know about what's the matter with you?]
<i>Your black-ass</i> supposed to be learning something (<i>BNH</i> 1991)	Ci vai per imparare qualche cosa [You're going to learn something]
<i>Shit, head negro!</i> (<i>PF</i> 1994)	Sì, grande capo! Certo! [Yes, big boss! Sure!]

As appears from these last examples in 3 (a.) in dubbing, cases of omissions are recorded specifically with regard to the expressive use of endonyms. Examples of this strategy are found in Calabrò's dubbing adaptation of *BHN* as well as in Francesco Vairano's adaptation of *Pulp Fiction*, where for example the colourful linguistic *exploit* by Samuel L. Jackson 'Shit, head negro!' has become the more humble 'Sì, grande capo! Certo!'.

On a more technical level, it can be observed that the quantitative and qualitative requirements of the synchronisation process do not appear to be the explanation for the neutralisation of these ethnic elements. As observed in the examples of Calabrò's *nigga* > *negraccio*, the lip synchronisation process seems, on the contrary, to influence the maintenance of the expression (and in particular to respect the quantitative value of the utterance) as well as to drive the choice of which specific word to choose (although the

qualitative value is given a greater or lesser importance depending on how closely the actors' mouth movements are discernible on the screen).

(b.) Ethnic neutralisation, but maintaining or reinforcing the slang or obscene expression:

<i>American dialogues</i>	<i>Italian dubbed dialogues</i>
You're a <i>cagey spook</i> (<i>Shaft</i> 1971)	Tu sei un <i>figlio di puttana</i> [you're a son of a whore]
<i>Black punk</i> (<i>Shaft</i> 1971)	<i>Figlio di puttana</i> [son of a whore]
It's plenty of trouble for you, <i>spook</i> (<i>FB</i> 1974)	Ce ne sono molti per te, <i>pezzente</i> [~there are many for you, beggar]
You <i>pink-ass</i> , corrupt judge! (<i>FB</i> 1974)	<i>Brutto stronzo smorfioso e corrotto!</i> [ugly simpering and corrupt piece of shit]
I'm going to call a <i>couple of hard, pipe-hitting niggers</i> to go to work on the homes here (<i>PF</i> 1994)	Chiamerò <i>qualche scagnozzo strafatto di crack</i> per fare un lavoretto in <i>questo cesso</i> [I'm going to call a couple of cracked-up thugs to do a little job in this dump]
You hear me talking, <i>hillbilly boy</i> ? (<i>PF</i> 1994)	Hai sentito quello che ho detto, <i>pezzo di merda</i> ? [Have you heard what I've said, piece of shit?]

Several examples also reveal that foul mouthed expressions linked to the sexual sphere or slang with no relation to ethnicity are often preferred as 'fillers' to either artificial-sounding ethnic slurs or highly charged insults used domestically against black Italians. Indicative examples of this strategy are found in translations produced either in 1970s, e.g., '*black punk*' > '*figlio di puttana*' (*Shaft*, 1971) or in the 1990s: '*a couple of hard, pipe-hitting niggers*' > '*qualche scagnozzo strafatto di crack*' (*PF*, 1994) etc. Dubbing translators in these cases have opted for sexual overtones, scatological terms or lower register choices in order to compensate for the offensive ethnic charge frequently interspersing the source texts. What appears to be in act here is a normative behaviour according to which the translator, more or less consciously, adheres to a set of pre-existing expectations which the target culture has with regard to linguistic weapons of abuse: according to this logic, the large deploy of sexualised insults and moderate swearing in general in the Italian dubbed film speech under analysis, taboo language which is often found in substitution of 'alien' ethnic referents (the expressive use of ethnonyms), would then confirm that the translator, operating within a specific norm-governed cultural system, pursues and subscribes to translational solutions (Foreignness/Otherness > domestication) which are compatible with commonly accepted, and variously standardised, target norms and practices (Toury, 1995: 56-57).

2.2. *Ethnonyms and racial slurs in Italian subtitling*

Investigating patterns in the translation of ethnonyms and racial slurs in Italian subtitles produced between the 1960s and 1990s presents some complications. The first is directly related to the more recent development of this practice of AVT in Italy, which implies that not every foreign film dubbed into Italian has also been subtitled and when there are subtitles they have always been prepared after the dubbed version. The more recent development of subtitling in Italy also implies that this translation practice has been subjected to a lower level of normativism and is likely to present some divergences from the behaviour observed in the more standardised dubbing practice. In fact, other methodological problems in studying Italian subtitles are the subtitlers' 'invisible' status (Venuti, 2008), therefore the difficulty to find out information related for example to contract conditions (e.g. time at disposable, cueing/spotting etc.). This series of contextual information is often useful to relate certain translational choices to time constraints or specific distribution requirements. For example, in films both dubbed and subtitled in the 1990s, Italian subtitles are either a reductionist version of previous dubbing lists (e.g. *BNH*, *PF*) or, if subtitles present some divergences, these are superficial and show that problematic translation choices are copied from the dubbed versions (e.g. *JB*). These subtitles are not 'retranslations' in the meaning discussed by Venuti for the case of literary translations (2004), but rather a copy of the dubbed dialogues variously trimmed and edited to fit the technical constraints of time and space on the screen.³² Although perhaps of little socio-linguistic interest, an analysis of the transposition of dubbed dialogues into subtitles could illustrate which of the expressive features of the dialogues have been considered redundant by the subtitlers (translators/cuers) and therefore cut out as dispensable non-plot-carrying elements of the speech. For reasons of space, here I will only concentrate on some clear cases of complete retranslation for the subtitled version.

The subtitles of *HN* and *Shaft* in particular reveal how Italian dubbed versions (almost contemporary to the original US release) and subtitles (prepared afterwards, presumably in the late 1990s and early 2000s) have approached differently the translation of ethnonyms and ethnophaulism. Let us have a look at a selection of examples.

From *HN*:

³² For a comprehensive discussion of subtitling's technical parameters (e.g. spatial, temporal, industrial etc.) and semiotic characteristics and conventions refer to Díaz Cintas and Remael (2007) and Georgakopoulou (2009).

<i>American dialogues</i>	<i>Italian dubbed dialogues</i>	<i>Italian subtitles</i>
I do not want that <i>negro</i> officer taken off this case.	Non voglio che quel poliziotto <i>negro</i> venga escluso dalle indagini.	Sono qui per dirle che voglio che sia quel poliziotto <i>nero</i> a occuparsi del caso. [I'm here to tell you I want the black police officer to take up the case]
OK, <i>black boy</i> , we come here to teach you some manners.	Allora, <i>muso nero</i> ! Siamo venuti ad insegnarti le buone maniere.	Siamo venuti a insegnarti le buone maniere. [We came to teach you good manners]
There's white time in jail, and that's <i>colored time</i> in jail. The worst kind you can do is <i>colored time</i> .	In prigione ci vanno i <i>negri</i> e ci vanno i bianchi. Ma la prigione che fanno i <i>negri</i> è peggio.	In prigione ci sono prigionieri bianchi e <i>neri</i> . Quelli <i>neri</i> se la passano peggio. [In jail there are white and black prisoners. The black ones have a tougher time]

From *Shaft*:

<i>American dialogues</i>	<i>Italian dubbed dialogues</i>	<i>Italian subtitles</i>
<i>Harlem cats</i> ?	<i>Neri o bianchi</i> ?	<i>Gente di Harlem</i> ? [people from Harlem]
That's 'cause <i>us black folk</i> talk mush mouth, Lieutenant.	Già, perché <i>noi altri negri</i> parliamo a bocca chiusa, tenente.	Forse perché <i>noi neri</i> parliamo male, tenente. [Perhaps because us blacks don't speak well, lieutenant]
Well, they're <i>soul brothers</i> .	Erano due <i>pantere nere</i> .	Sono <i>fratelli neri</i> . [They're black brothers.]
What is it with this <i>black shit</i> ?	Che c'entrano queste <i>fesserie sui negri</i> .	Basta con queste <i>storie sui neri</i> ! [Cut with these stories about blacks]
Yeah, I want you 'cause you're a <i>black spade detective</i> .	Sì, voglio te perché sei uno <i>sbirro negro</i> .	Ti voglio perché sei <i>un segugio nero di prim'ordine</i> . [I want you because you're a first class black sleuth]
- I'm looking for a <i>nigger</i> named John Shaft. - You just found him, <i>wop</i> - We've even got time for you to have <i>your soul food</i> .	-Cerco un <i>muso nero</i> che si chiama John Shaft. - Allora l'hai trovato, <i>wop</i> ! ... - Abbiamo tempo. Puoi mangiarti anche <i>un cornetto</i> .	- Cerco un <i>negro</i> che si chiama John Shaft. [I'm looking for a negro/nigger named John Shaft] - Ce l'hai davanti, <i>maccheroni</i> ! [He's in front of you, maccheroni] ... - Puoi anche mangiarti <i>uno</i>

		<i>dei vostri piatti. [You can also eat one of your dishes]</i>
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The chronological comparison between ethnonyms and racial slurs in the dubbed and subtitled versions reveals clear examples of temporal socio-linguistic variation, which can be summarised as below:

US 1960-70s films	Italy 1960-70s dubbings	Subtitles (1990s)
<i>Nigger</i>	<i>Muso nero/ negro</i>	<i>Negro</i>
<i>Negro</i>	<i>Negro</i>	<i>Nero</i>
<i>Black</i>	<i>Muso nero/negro</i>	<i>Nero</i>
<i>Colored</i>	<i>Negro/di colore</i>	<i>Nero/di colore</i>

Interestingly, subtitles showcase with a higher frequency than dubbing a reduction of the offensive charge in the translation of racial slurs: from the corpus, for example, racist expressions such as *muso nero* have completely disappeared. Moreover, the ‘politically correct’ term – or what is considered by the translators to be the ‘official’ Italian version of the English offensive slur – has changed significantly with respect to the older translations (e.g. *nigger* > *muso nero/negro* > *negro*; *negro*, *black* > *muso nero/negro* > *nero*). Other examples show that subtitlers do not feel the need to explicate the ethnic connotation of specific geographical referents (e.g., *Harlem cats* > *bianchi o neri?* > *gente di Harlem*); others show the historical variation in the usage, and translation, of ethno-cultural/political referents (*soul brothers* > *pantere nere* > *black brothers*). Finally, offensive and expressive ethnic language is frequently omitted, for these traits are considered unnecessary, non-plot carrying elements of the discourse, and thus dispensed with possibly during the final time-cueing and line segmentation stage.

If the most obvious solution in subtitles is the reduction of the endonyms, mostly in their expressive connotation, the comparatively higher currency of ethnic related words in dubbing should be related to the fact that dubbing adapters *must* translate them, dealing with the quantitative and qualitative constraints of lip synchronisation. Although subtitled versions tend to reproduce a lower number of occurrences, on the other hand, they can count on what Nedergaard-Larsen has labelled soundtrack *feedback effect* (1993: 207-41) and later Gottlieb

as *intersemiotic feedback* (2003: 67), a redundancy of information due to the extra stimuli (audio-visual-written channels) that rely on the same verbal utterances. Both expressions recall the positive or negative impact of picture and sound on audience comprehension of the foreign film dialogues. To understand the role of the feedback effect, let us take as an example the use of endonyms in ‘Hood’ films. Because these films popularly cast American rappers as leading actors (e.g., Ice-T, Ice Cube et al.) it is probable that the Italian spectators who choose to watch the DVD’s subtitled version, do so because they like rap music. These potential spectators might also be familiar with the redundant expressive use of ethnonyms (e.g. *nigga* for alliteration, rhyme, affection) in rap and hip hop lyrics. In this case, the feedback effect would convey the very redundancy that subtitles did not have space to convey, and this redundancy for expressivity will be understood by the Italian spectators because of their strong degree of familiarity with American rap and hip hop music.³³

3. Summing up

The present investigation on the use of ethnonyms and racial slurs in American film dialogues, and on their translation in the Italian language, has revealed how these linguistic markers play a fundamental role in asserting and accentuating the American characters’ blackness. The study has also showed how linguistic characterisation in films in relation to issues of racism and ethnicity reflects, although in a fictional way, the way different societies have denoted ethnonyms and racial slurs outside the silver screen.

A comparative analysis of original dialogues, Italian translations made in the 1970s (dubbing) and retranslations of the 1990s (subtitles) has suggested a complex pattern of verbal dynamics (e.g. tabooisation of *nigger/muso nero*, shifts in connotation for *negro/black/nero*). The corpus under analysis has also revealed the translators’ general preference, either in dubbing and subtitling, for standard Italian expressions, which are mostly calqued on the American originals, rather than adopting strong domestic ethnophaulisms exclusive of the Italian language and dialects. Individual translation choices in dubbing play an active role in challenging the limited range of lexical alternatives available in the standard Italian vocabulary with reference to blackness. The subtitled versions in particular, i.e. the more recent translations, suggest that subtitlers prefer to use a less offensive vocabulary to label

³³ As Nedergaard-Larsen has originally argued, ‘the strength of the feedback effect from the dialogue depends partly on the audience’s degree of familiarity with the language of the dialogue, [and] partly on how closely this language is related to the language of the audience’ (1993: 214).

American blackness, adhering in this stance to shifting mores of acceptability in the use of verbal ethnic offence in both the American and the Italian socio-cultural systems.

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